

AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS:

Please amend the claims as follows:

Claims 1-11. (Canceled)

12. (Previously Presented) An isolated HCV envelope protein or functionally equivalent part thereof comprising at least one Cys amino acid which is reversibly protected.

13. (Previously Presented) The isolated HCV envelope protein or functionally equivalent part thereof according to claim 12 wherein said Cys amino acid is reversibly protected by chemical and/or enzymatic means.

14. (Previously Presented) The isolated HCV envelope protein or functionally equivalent part thereof according to claim 12 wherein said Cys amino acid is reversibly protected by sulfonation.

15. (Previously Presented) The isolated HCV envelope protein according to claim 12 which is chosen from the group consisting of E1s or E1p.

16. (Previously Presented) The isolated HCV envelope protein or functionally equivalent part thereof according to claim 12 wherein the reversible protection of the Cys amino acid is removed.

17. (Previously Presented) An immunogenic composition comprising the isolated HCV envelope protein or functionally equivalent part thereof according to claim 12 or 16.

18. (Previously Presented) A composition comprising an isolated HCV envelope protein or functionally equivalent part thereof according to claim 12 or 16 and at least one of a pharmaceutically acceptable carrier, adjuvant or excipient.

19. (Previously Presented) The composition according to claim 18 which is an immunogenic composition.

20. (Previously Presented) A method for raising antibodies that specifically recognize hepatitis C virus envelope protein or a functionally equivalent part thereof, comprising administering the isolated hepatitis C virus envelope protein or a part thereof according to claim 12 or 16 to a mammal.

21. (Withdrawn) An immunoassay for detecting HCV antibody in a biological sample, said immunoassay comprising the steps of:

- incubating said biological sample with an isolated HCV protein or functionally equivalent part thereof according to claim 12 or 16 under conditions that allow formation of a HCV antibody-HCV protein complex; and
- determining whether said HCV antibody-HCV protein complex is formed.

22. (Previously Presented) The isolated HCV envelope protein or functionally equivalent part thereof according to claim 16 which is obtained by a purification procedure including the steps of:

- (i) purifying said HCV envelope protein or functionally equivalent part thereof in which the Cys amino acid is reversibly protected by chemical and/or enzymatic means,

(ii) removal of the reversible protection state of the Cys amino acid in the HCV envelope protein or part thereof obtained in (i),

(iii) obtaining a HCV envelope protein or functionally equivalent part thereof in which the cysteines are deprotected.

23. (Previously Presented) The isolated HCV envelope protein or functionally equivalent part thereof according to claim 12 which is obtained by a purification procedure including the step of purifying said HCV envelope protein or functionally equivalent part thereof in which the Cys amino acid is reversibly protected by chemical and/or enzymatic means.

24. (Currently Amended) An isolated hepatitis C virus envelope protein or functionally equivalent part according to claim 12 wherein said protein or functionally equivalent part thereof comprises at least two Cys amino acids in the configuration Cys-X₁-X₂-Cys (SEQ ID NO:7) wherein X₁ and X₂ are, independently, any amino acid.

25. (Previously Presented) An isolated hepatitis C virus envelope protein or functionally equivalent part thereof of claim 24 wherein X₁ is selected from the group consisting of Val, Leu or Ile.

26. (Previously Presented) An isolated hepatitis C virus envelope protein or functionally equivalent part thereof of claim 24 or 25 wherein X₂ is Pro.

27. (Previously Presented) A method of claim 20 wherein said mammal is a human.

28. (Previously Presented) A method for raising antibodies that specifically recognize hepatitis C virus envelope protein or a functionally equivalent part thereof, comprising administering the composition according to claim 18 to a mammal.

29. (Previously Presented) A method of claim 28 wherein said mammal is a human.

30. (Previously Presented) A method of immunizing a mammal against hepatitis C virus comprising administering the isolated hepatitis C virus envelope protein or a functionally equivalent part thereof according to claim 12 or 16 to said mammal.

31. (Previously Presented) A method of claim 30 wherein said mammal is a human.

32. (Previously Presented) A method of immunizing a mammal against hepatitis C virus comprising administering the composition of claim 18 to said mammal.

33. (Previously Presented) A method of claim 32 wherein said mammal is a human.

34. (Previously Presented) A medicament comprising the isolated HCV envelope protein or functionally equivalent part thereof according to claim 12 or 16.